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Children and Reactions to Terrorism: How Parents Can Help Children Cope

By Tim Murphy, Ph.D.

As we face the threat of terrorism and war, we find our stress levels rising. You cannot turn on the TV, pick up a newspaper or listen to the radio without hearing or seeing vivid images that increase our concerns. When the government elevates the threat level, our worries also elevate.

One of the goals of terrorists, in fact, is to build anxiety levels to the point that they disrupt our everyday lives. Fears impact our productivity and concentration as we become preoccupied with worry rather than work. Trouble sleeping, nervousness, short tempers, and sadness are some of the many reactions to stress adults may experience. As tough as it is on adults, it's harder on children. As a parent, you are the most important person in your children's life to help them identify and cope with their stress during this very difficult time. You can take

the following steps to help your family deal with the worries about terrorism and war: listen to a child's concerns, limit the news, look to their needs and learn what to do.

Listen to a child's concerns

If you don't know what's on your child's mind, ask. Younger children may have trouble putting their feelings into words, and some teenagers may avoid talking with parents because they want to appear mature enough to handle it on their own.

In both cases, it is important to get them to talk anyway. When children don't share, watch for symptoms indicating they are worried. These signs may include:

- **Changes in personality** — A quiet child may become more active. An active child may get quieter. A social child may want to be left alone. Some children will hover closer to parents, and some cling and seek more physical contact and affection. Also watch for changes in appetite (eating less or eating more) and sleep (more restless sleep or increasing need for sleep).
- **Changes in mood** — Sadness, more anger, or fighting with siblings and parents can all indicate increased anxiety. Anger never exists without some emotional trigger, including fear or excessive worry.
- **Changes in communication** — Teens spend more time talking with friends about the issues, especially on the phone or via the Internet. Although it's good for them to be supportive of each other, the facts are essential. False rumors spread quickly and affect this group already so influenced by peers. Make sure you ask what information they are sharing so you can offer facts and reassurance.

Limit the news

After the September 11th attacks, many families left the TV or radio news on for hours in the background. We listened because we wanted to be informed in the hope that we could better understand what was so incomprehensible. Later, we

discovered that children were hearing much of the news and feeling overwhelmed by what they heard.

Younger children are especially vulnerable if they don't understand the threats may be far away. When they hear about bombings and see soldiers and citizens putting on gas masks, they may think this is down the street, not across the world. Even when reassured the threats and battles are "far away" or "won't happen here," they still notice parents' emotions when hearing discussions about war and terrorist attacks and feel frightened.

Get the news you need and then turn it off. If children are playing nearby, the repetitive stories and images may affect them without you even realizing it. Wait until they are out of the room. Sometimes, young children fail to realize that what is re-broadcast happened hours or days ago. They may think it's actually happening every half hour or whenever they see it.

Ask if children have any questions. Decide how much information they can handle for their ages and maturity. Often, children require much smaller bits of information, just enough to satisfy their curiosity, compared to our quest for as much as we can digest.

As the work of Fred Rogers also has taught over the years, be sure to point out the helpers in difficult situations children see on television — firefighters, police officers, the military, doctors, nurses, rescue workers, and government leaders. It's comforting and reassuring for children to know there are grownups who will care for them and others in need.

Look To Their Needs

Threats and worries can distract us. Routines get disrupted, appointments forgotten, and the simple but important things get overlooked. Keeping family routines gives all of us a sense of stability and predictability to help weather stress. For children:

- Let them go to school, stay on sports teams, eat meals with the family, shop, complete homework, do chores and stick to normal bedtimes.
- Maintain standards for doing a good job, especially for homework and

chores. Feelings of mastery and control reduce their stress.

- Remind them they will be cared for. Reassure them they are safe and protected. Remember, children are great imitators. If you're calm, they likely will be calm, too.
- Give comfort and inspiration. Reading stories or talking about heroes and mentors helps children learn strength and courage from others. Our history is filled with stories of ordinary people who, when called upon, did extraordinary things. Even make-believe characters in storybooks or real heroes with teens inspire us. Ask your local librarian for book recommendations.

For adults:

- Eat right, get enough rest, and look after your own needs. The same goes for exercise. Keep up your own fitness routines as working out reduces the body's stress levels. Share your worries with a friend. Allow yourself to laugh or even cry, if you must. A sense of humor is a great asset.
- Keep things in perspective by remembering that your chances of being harmed in an ordinary accident far exceed any chance of your harm through a terrorist strike. All of these steps help you to remain calm and better equipped to help yourself and your children during stressful times.
- If stress and worry remain, consult your physician or a therapist. Prolonged anxiety can take its toll on the body and mind. You should feel free to speak with the pediatrician or a child therapist if you see signs of prolonged stress in your son or daughter.

Learn what to do

When handling a threatening situation, it's normal to feel stressed. The less control you feel, the higher your stress level. Then, you might not deal with real problems as effectively. With proper information and preparation, you take back

some of those things that were previously out of your control. It really can make you feel better equipped to go about living each day.

Get the facts about what threats may exist and what you should do. The better informed you are, the better you deal with problems. Gather information from the Homeland Security Web site www.dhs.gov or www.ready.gov to better understand chemical and biological weapons.

Develop a plan. Just as you should have for any weather or fire emergency, you should have a plan in case of terrorist attack. Practice ways to get to a safe place, either remaining in the house in case of a weather emergency or getting out in case of a fire. There are three important questions for which you and your children should have answers, especially in the case that you are separated during an emergency:

- **Where do I go?** Have a safe location (or locations) where everybody in your family knows to meet in the case of an emergency. Depending on what type of an emergency this is, it might be your home, a neighbor's home, or even your basement. But make sure that everybody in your family knows where to go in each situation. If you are caught in traffic or unable to get home right away, arrange a safe place for your child to meet you.
- **What do I do?** Each emergency has different steps to take to avoid harm and protect your family. Local fire departments often hold training exercises to teach children what to do in an emergency. Go over with your children simple, easy steps to follow for a variety of emergency scenarios.
- **Who do I call?** Make sure each member of your family has a simple list of phone numbers to call in case of emergency. Remember to include a list of several numbers, in case phone lines or cell phone towers in certain areas are not functioning. For example, the World Trade Center housed many of the cell phone towers for the New York City area. That, coupled with a drastic increase in calls to New York City, made cell phones useless for most of the day.

Be prepared with the right supplies at home. Every home should have basic emergency supplies such as water, canned food, flashlights, batteries, blankets, and a fire extinguisher.

Let your child's school know how to reach you in an emergency, and be sure that you understand your school's plan for your child's safety while there. Arrange a backup plan if your child ends up at home alone during an emergency.

A final word

Unfortunately, we are dealing with real threats of terrorism that may not go away soon. However, there are thousands and thousands of people focused solely on making our hometowns safe. Police and fire fighters, soldiers and citizens, are working night and day for our nation's safety, but none of them are more important to your family than you and your own efforts. The comfort, reassurance, and guidance you provide every day will make a world of difference in how family members (and children) will handle these challenges and will build the confidence and courage necessary during these troubled times.

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